



Obituary stories

(Example 10.6 from *Journalism: Who, What, When, Where, Why and How*)

The obituary is another basic form of journalistic writing. This story begins with the details of the death and the funeral arrangements - the news that readers are likely to want first. The story goes on to give details of the person's life, quoting someone who knows the person and can speak about her. It ends with information about survivors and how the family would like for friends to respond. An obituary story sometimes uses more formal language than is found in other news stories. (Do you know why? Answer below.)

An obituary lead paragraph is often two sentences long -- one of the few times it is appropriate to violate the one-sentence rule for inverted pyramid news stories.

Most obituaries try to give a specific cause of death rather than simply saying some vague such as "a long illness."

Quoting someone who is not a member of the family add credibility to the story.

Funeral arrangements should be included. If they are not known, the obit should say something like, "Arrangements are incomplete."

Obituaries usually end with a listing of surviving family members. Direct descendants are always listed; indirect descendants (nieces, nephews, etc.) are sometimes listed. Information about flowers or memorials is generally in the final paragraph.

Long-time organist, teacher dies after lengthy illness

Mattie Harrison, long-time organist for the Forest Lake United Methodist Church, died at her home on Wednesday after a long illness. She was 84 years old.

Harrison, a life-long resident of Midville, had battled cancer in her last years but had managed to remain active until just a few months ago.

"She never gave up," John Hall, senior minister at the church, said. "She always had such a wonderful spirit. She was such an inspiration. We used to love to see her coming through the door."

A memorial service is planned for her on Saturday at 2 p.m. at the church.

Harrison was born Mattie Chalmers and grew up on the west side of town and attended the old City High School, graduating in 1935. She attended Midville State University and in 1940 received a degree in elementary education.

She also married Alexander Harrison, a local plumber, that year.

She had played the piano and organ since childhood, and after she began married life, she gave private lessons.

"I imagine that she taught hundreds, if not thousands, of Midville children how to read music and play the piano," Hall said.

She began playing the organ at the church when it first acquired one in the 1950s, and she was the regular organist for the next 35 years. She was also a member of the Forest Lake Women's Book Club.

Harrison's husband died in 1995, just after they had celebrated their 55th wedding anniversary.

Harrison is survived by two daughters, Estelle Wilson of Abingdon, Va., and Hollice Wakefield of Midville; one son, Alexander Harrison Jr., of Pleasant Ridge, Tennessee; 10 grandchildren; and six great-grandchildren.

In lieu of flowers, the family has requested that contributions be made to the Mattie Harrison Scholarship Fund at Midville State University of the organ fund at Forest Lake United Methodist Church.

Answer: Many people clip and save obituaries and expect them to be written more formally.